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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000557

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, INR/NESA, SA/PD

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Campaign Snapshot: Campaigning set to end March 30; Conflicting poll results; Shooting incidents

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 290252Z Mar 04

- (B) FBIS Reston Va DTG 290222Z Mar 04  
- (C) Colombo 545, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) In this message, Mission reviews the following items involving Sri Lanka's April 2 parliamentary election campaign:

-- Per the rules, campaigning set to end March 30, 48 hours before election day.

-- Conflicting poll results.

-- In visit to southern districts, Mission team finds strong support for alliance between President's party and radical JVP.

-- Shooting incidents spark concerns that the Tigers may be increasing their efforts to scare Tamil voters into supporting pro-LTTE party.

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Campaigning set to wrap up  
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2. (U) Per Sri Lanka's election rules, campaigning for the April 2 parliamentary election is set to end on March 30, 48 hours before election day. All campaign activities (rallies, speeches, etc.) must be completed before midnight March 30. March 30 is also the last day to place political ads in the print media. For electronic media, all campaign advertisements or programs of a political nature must stop by midnight March 29.

3. (U) In line with these constraints, Sri Lanka's political parties are wrapping up their campaigns. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) will hold its final rally in Colombo on the afternoon of March 30. President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) will also hold its final rally the same day in another part of Colombo. Kumaratunga and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Somawansa Amarasinghe are expected to speak at the UPFA rally. Both the UNP and UPFA rallies are expected to be quite large.

4. (SBU) COMMENT: The campaign has been relatively subdued since it began in early February. In general, many if not most Sri Lankans did not want elections at this time (the April 2 election, which was called three years early, is the fourth national election, presidential or parliamentary, since 1999). While not apathetic, per se, Sri Lankans never did seem to get into the swing of the campaign. That said, the pace of campaign activities has picked up in the past several days. Although technically against regulations, more campaign-related posters and banners can be seen, for example. In addition, more firecrackers have been going off and many vehicles equipped with megaphones have been blaring away on Colombo's streets. END COMMENT.

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Poll results vary  
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5. (U) The following poll results seem to indicate that voter attitudes are scattered across the board as the parliamentary election nears:

-- The latest poll conducted by the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a local think-tank, indicates that the UNP may be making some progress with voters on economic-related issues, while maintaining its lead on peace process issues. (USAID provides some of the funding for CPA's polling.) The latest results show, for example, that 28 percent (up from 18 percent) of

people feel the UNP would be the best party to reduce the cost of living, versus 38 percent (up from 35) of those polled who felt the UPFA would be better in this area. Forty-four percent of people in the latest CPA poll also felt the UNP was best suited to handle the peace process, giving the UNP a large lead in this area compared to the UPFA. The UNP's lead in this area continues the trend seen in earlier CPA polls.

-- The latest poll conducted by the Org-MARG Smart company, a division of A.C. Nielsen, indicated that the UPFA had a lead of 7 percent in southern Sri Lanka. In the meantime, the pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the UNP were racking up a large lead in the north and east. Based on these results, Org-Marg believes the election will not be won outright by any party, but will be a three-way tussle among the UPFA, the UNP, and the TNA.

-- Another poll, which appeared in the English-language DAILY NEWS on March 29, showed a strong lead for President Kumaratunga. Fifty-seven percent of poll respondents, for example, rated Kumaratunga's leadership abilities higher than those of the Prime Minister, who garnered a relatively low 37 percent. The poll, conducted by "Infoserve," a local firm, also claimed that 53 percent of those polled rated the UPFA as a "party capable of fulfilling people's aspirations," compared to 31 percent who sided with the UNP on this question. (Infoserve is not known to Mission. State-run media, including the DAILY NEWS, have been fabricating and wildly skewing poll data during this campaign -- see Reftels.)

16. (C) COMMENT: Polling is a relatively new and inexact science in Sri Lanka. With that caveat, the polls generally seem to be showing that the UPFA started out fast and probably had a large lead going into the final stretch of the campaign. The UPFA's apparent lead forced the UNP to play catch up and the UNP probably has made some degree of progress in cutting into the UPFA's lead. Going into the last several days of the campaign, however, it appears that either party could win depending on which one wins over the large number of undecided voters. (Mission will be reviewing in Septel the implications for U.S. policy of the likely post-election scenarios.) END COMMENT.

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Strong support for UPFA in Deep South

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17. (C) During a March 27-28 trip by poloff and Pol FSN, the UPFA appeared to be doing quite well in Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhist-dominated "deep south." In the districts of Matara and Galle, for example, UPFA posters and other campaign paraphernalia were extremely visible, far eclipsing those put up by the UNP. Mangala Samaweera, Matara District UPFA leader and a senior MP, expressed great optimism about the race, predicting that the UPFA would win Matara with ease. He also asserted that country-wide the UPFA would capture "at least" 116 seats (113 seats or more are needed to form a majority in Parliament). Many interlocutors saw economic issues as key to the race. Samaraweera declared that economic dividends from the UNP's peace process had failed to reach rank-and-file voters in the south and indeed had not been felt outside the "Colombo cocktail circuit." UNP MP for Galle District H. Nanayakkara allowed that the UPFA appeared stronger in Galle District compared to the past. This was due to the perception among southern voters that the UNP had not significantly "bettered the quality of life at a grassroots level," he said.

18. (C) COMMENT: The UPFA appears to be doing quite well with Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese Buddhist community. Given its strength in minority communities (Muslims, Tamils, Christians), the UNP does not have to win a majority among Sinhalese Buddhists. It needs to keep the vote in the Sinhalese community relatively close, however, or it will lose to the UPFA. Based on what poloff saw and heard during his trip to the deep south, the UPFA's lead in that region appears sizable, which could present problems for the UNP. END COMMENT.

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Shooting Incidents renew worries about LTTE

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19. (C) Three shooting incidents on March 27 have sparked concerns that the LTTE may be increasing its efforts to influence Tamil voters via coercion and fear ahead of the election. Two of the shooting incidents took place in Colombo and the other near the eastern city of Batticaloa. In one of the Colombo incidents, UNP candidate and former Hindu Affairs Minister T. Maheswaran was shot in the neck at a rally. He is now reported to be in stable condition following surgery.

In the other Colombo incident, a candidate of the anti-LTTE Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) was shot at while in a car, but was not hit. In the third incident, Batticaloa Government Agent (GA) R. Monunagurusamy was shot in the head and neck. He was rushed to a Colombo hospital and he is now reported to be in stable condition. So far, police have not made any arrests connected to the incidents and no group has taken responsibility.

10. (C) COMMENT: The shooting incidents were quite brazen. Maheswaran, for example, a well-known former minister, was shot at a rally. Meanwhile, the GA, the highest-level civilian official for the GSL in Batticaloa, was shot in broad daylight as he returned to his office from a meeting. Although the perpetrators have not yet been caught, the incidents bear the hallmarks of many past Tamil Tiger attacks. Some observers believe that the LTTE's possible motive in carrying out such attacks would be to frighten Tamil voters ahead of the April 2 election, scaring them into supporting the TNA. If this is the case, more such attacks could be forthcoming. END COMMENT.

11. (U) Minimize considered.

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